

***Knowing Who You Are***

**A Message for All Faiths**

**Unitarian Congregation**

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I was watching the Democratic  
Candidate debate Thursday evening  
and realized that two candidates,  
Senator Harris and Mayor Pete,  
touched on my message I had  
prepared for this morning. The final

question that each candidate answered was about what candidates did in the face of their biggest professional setback. Senator Harris ended her answer by saying she was taught to never let people tell you who you are. You tell them who you are. Mayor Pete commented that we have to know what we are about. These are themes in our message today. It's a message of self-differentiation. That is, having the ability to know who we are so

when we are told who we know we aren't we are able to know the difference and the truth.

I've shared with you that my childhood was traumatizing.

Physical and verbal abuse were part of my everyday experience. I was told that I was stupid, worthless, that I wouldn't amount to anything, that people couldn't love me. I believed it. My thinking that all these things were true really stunted my emotional development. Through

my childhood into my twenties I had confidence issues, felt I had nothing to offer, that I could never achieve what I wanted, that I was incapable of being loved or to love, who would want me? This may sound odd, but I told myself and others that I wasn't loved the first half of my life and I could make it through the second half without love. Can you believe that was my mantra? Luckily, I had a husband who helped me understand none of this

was real. I had good friends and solid people around me helping me break free.

I allowed people to tell me who I was and with devastating consequences. I didn't know who I was and that's what made it easy for me to believe all those terrible things. Things changed. I was saved. No, I didn't accept Jesus as my savior. I accepted the love and support my grandmother gave me. She did everything she could to

remove me from everything  
abusive. She was the first person  
that made me feel worth,  
intelligence, and acceptance. She  
saved me. Because of her and  
others I mentioned earlier I am here  
today telling you I know who I am.  
I saved myself. I promised myself  
that I would no longer accept things  
about myself that are not truth. If I  
was to commit my life to serving  
others as a Minister I must dwell in  
authenticity. And if you call me

anything but my name I won't  
answer. I won't believe or take on  
anything but my name, who I know  
I am. This is self-differentiation.

Let us ask ourselves, "Why do I  
allow other people's feelings,  
opinions, decisions to have so much  
power over my own? How do I (and  
we) learn to be well differentiated?"

"Know Thyself" has been a warning  
uttered by philosophers down the  
ages. Socrates supposedly learned  
the motto from the ancient oracle at

Delphi. In China, the sage Lao Tze said that "He who knows others is wise, but he who knows himself is enlightened." Jesus also, according to the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, advised his disciples that "When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty ...."

Fairy tales and fables are filled with the motif of the boy or girl who has somehow misplaced the knowledge of his or her true identity. The beggar turns out to be a prince. The stepchild who's been told she's plain-looking is actually the most beautiful of all. Discovering who you really are, the stories suggest, is like uncovering an unsuspected treasure, something you didn't know you had that bestows value and

meaning on the rest of life, and  
which you possessed all along.

But knowing oneself is no easy task.

For most, it is a lifelong endeavor.

The author May Sarton wrote of her  
own quest for selfhood and  
authenticity in her journals and her  
poetry. She wrote,

Now I become myself. It's taken

Time, many years and places;

I have been dissolved and shaken,

Worn other people's faces,

It wasn't until mid-life, Sarton said, that she began the work of creating a self, after the death of her parents forced her to confront seriously the purpose of her own life here on earth. With her childhood home gone, she turned to the task of establishing her own space, building a private retreat in Nelson, New Hampshire, where the New England landscape seemed a reflection of her own rugged resolve to face life on

her own terms. "For ten years I have  
been rooted in these hills," she  
wrote at the age of sixty,

The changing light on landlocked  
lakes,

For ten years have called a  
mountain, friend,

Have been nourished by plants, still  
waters,

Trees in their seasons,

Have fought in this quiet place

For my self.

"I came here to create a world," she  
said,

As strong, renewable, fertile,

As the world of nature all around  
me

Learned to clear myself as I have  
cleared the pasture,

Learned to wait,

Learned that change is always in the  
making

(Inner and outer) if one can be  
patient,

Learned to trust myself.

That trust had its costs. In 1965, her literary agent advised her not to even try to publish the novel where Sarton first revealed her own sexual orientation. Her lectureship at Wellesley was canceled as a result of her coming out. In her journal *Recovering*, she wrote:

In spite of all the doors opening these days that permit homosexuals to enter the stream of life instead of

being treated as outcasts forever  
relegated to the backwaters, pariahs  
whom it is best to pretend do not  
exist, there is still much civilizing to  
be accomplished. On the whole,  
society itself still reacts to certain  
words with outrage.”

And yet for all her frankness, Sarton  
always resisted those who wished to  
label her as a "lesbian writer." She  
saw herself instead as a humanist, in  
the original spirit of that term, as  
one who could say that "nothing

human is alien to me." Sexual liberation for her was never an end in itself, but rather a means to the thing that really mattered, learning to be at home in her own skin and at peace with herself, learning to be singular and mortal, comfortable with her own birth and death.

Our commitment to build an inclusive community springs from the realization that each one of us has a unique personality and a special contribution to make.

Finding our own voice, learning to love and care for ourselves in the way that enables us to care for others, is work that concerns us all.

It's a task inseparable from the commandment, "Know Thyself."

I think in this regard of Stephen Sharp, a member of a congregation I served in Brookfield,

Massachusetts, who died many years ago from AIDS. Stephen was cut down in the very middle of life..

Although he was exposed to the arts

early in his youth, when he had a chance to study with a gifted teacher from the Alvin Ailey dance company at a private academy in Norfolk, Stephen seemed to drift for many years. Like many young people, he felt isolated and unsure of himself, his teenage insecurities compounded by the fact that he was gay. In his twenties, he said, "I wasn't doing anything with my life, I wasn't happy, I wasn't doing what I wanted, I was going from a string of

jobs ... feeling like a failure." Then came the test results for HIV, and something shifted. "It really dawned on me, this is it," he told a friend. Stephen had to begin thinking hard about what he intended to do with his life at that point. "I quit my job and started to do what I wanted to do, which was theater, and I threw my whole body into it," working first with the Garage Theater and then founding his own troupe, the Green Candle Theater Company. "I

get a lot of comfort and solace in the things that I have done since being diagnosed," he said before he died.

"It's like everything I did before was inconsequential. I wanted to be someone that people would respect, who had integrity, who stood for something and accomplished something and somehow benefitted the rest of the world and society."

Visiting with Stephen at his home and in the hospital, it became clear to me that he'd achieved the

personal integrity he longed for, he'd  
come to terms with who he was and  
what he'd done with his life, and  
although Stephen's notions of an  
afterlife and immortality remained  
rather nebulous, his thirty-some  
years in this world had attained a  
kind of purposefulness and self-  
discipline that enabled him to meet  
the end with a composure and calm  
born of the knowledge that his life  
was in some important sense

complete. His life had gained a self-contained dignity and repose.

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus proclaims, "That which you have will save you if you bring it forth from yourselves. That which you do not have within you [will] kill you if you do not have it within you." It's one of those pithy and paradoxical teachings that seem to have come straight from the master's lips, addressed directly to each one of us. That which you have will save you

if you bring it forth from  
yourselves ... that being your own,  
inimitable, perishing and luminous  
self. Embracing that, we begin to  
embrace all things.

May it be so.